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ABSTRACT

Rather than begin an undergraduate class in feminist theory with the assertion that such theory is important because of its social implications--and then attempt to prove it--it is more effective to begin with a more neutral philosophical discussion that will act as a foundation for its premises. Judith Butler's essay "Gender Trouble" becomes an effective pedagogical tool as it engages the ontological root of the matter--the traditional conception of identity that produces phallocentric public policy as its effect. While Romantic ideas of identity posit a self distinct from other selves--with an interior essence that remains constant and an exterior realm subject to social influence and behavioral change--Butler suggests that even the interior essence is socially constructed through gender identification. When a subject is attempting to be a woman, she is appropriating and attempting to imitate a constructed fantasy. When a young girl looks at the gestures and actions of a woman, she conceives of those gestures as an indication of an essential femininity within. Thus the girl learns to enact the gestures that signify "woman." The woman herself learns to "perform" as a woman in the exact same way. By subverting the idea that gender identity is the product of an inevitable structural law, or the expression of a natural essence, Butler's critique allows readers to pay attention to what she calls the disciplinary powers that prescribe and regulate behavior. (TB)

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Teaching Feminist Theory Via Philosophy: Political Implications of an Ontological Inquiry in Judith Butler's Gender Trouble

Most undergraduates who show immediate aversion to feminist theory are suspicious that its texts expect the reader to engage it with a mind already aligned with a specific leftist political stance. Because the term "feminist" is already so politicized to students, they often meet course material with the misconception that they're required to accept its political implications as self-evident, as a given premise from which their study is expected to proceed. Rather than begin class with the assertion that feminist theory is important because of its social implications--and then attempt to prove it--it's more effective to begin with a more neutral philosophical discussion that will act as a foundation for its premises. Judith Butler's essay "Gender Trouble"[1] becomes an effective pedagogical tool as it engages the ontological root of the matter--the traditional conception of identity that produces phallocentric public policy as its effect.

By its conclusion, "Gender Trouble" also carries the student into the thick of current debates. The text engages, for instance, what is now a serious bone of contention among many theoreticians, authors and activists, a debate that orbits around the complaint that a poststructuralist approach like Butler's inhibits the discovery or formation of a feminine space by denying ontological status to femininity. Since it would be pointless to endorse a text that

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[1] Judith Butler, "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse," Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990).

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fails to withstand such an indictment, my conclusion will defend Butler's deconstruction and argue that; (1) social and political reform--or the motivations that attend such projects--do not disappear with the recognition that "woman" is a category inscribed onto the body almost entirely by external powers, and; (2) the current cry to rescue "agency" from poststructural critique and re-locate it in the self actually serves a reactionary project of drawing attention away from the material reality of institutional subjection in favor of the more docile fantasy of autonomous subjectivity.[2]

Before diving into Butler's work, the following analysis of "the self" as a metaphysical term should be introduced to students as way of making them aware of the philosophical assumptions behind traditional humanism.

Normally, we don't like to think of the self as something defined entirely in terms of the body, as if its boundaries were identical to the boundaries of one's skin. We wouldn't want to say that amputating an arm would somehow disrupt the integrity of the self. And even if we locate it in the brain--by making it synonymous with something like the word "consciousness"--we still wouldn't say that the self is identical to brain matter. If bits of a person's brain were removed, but consciousness remained, we wouldn't claim that the self that emerges from the operation is now incomplete. As long as the patient isn't dead or unconscious, s/he is still said to have a "center of consciousness".

We also have a desire to establish the self as something is bounded. If my self is to be distinguished from yours, or if it is to be distinguished from other external phenomena, it

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[2] For a convincing critique of poststructuralism in the academy, however, see Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," Making Face, Making Soul = Haciendo Caras, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990) 335-345. Many existing theoretical critiques, Christian observes, "sought to 'deconstruct' the tradition to which they belonged even as they used the same forms, style, language of that tradition, forms which necessarily embody its values" (339).

must be conceived as something discrete--that is, as something with a boundary. Descartes helped to make this boundary a first principle; from him we inherited the notion that each of us lives in a kind of bubble of subjectivity, separated forever from the real "objective" world outside the bubble. Our awareness is conceived as existing in the center of that semi-transparent sphere.

The notion of a center is crucial to our normal conception of the self. It is the metaphysical source, for instance, of what we call free will. There is said to be a "decision made" before any consciously willful act. In order for the decision to have been freely made, free of the contingency of biological processes, it must first and foremost originate itself; or, less cryptically, it must simply come from nowhere. One can talk about a spiritual realm, to fill up that spatial void, and in fact we often do. Thus, the will is joined to something called the "mind" or the "soul",[3] both of which must keep clear of the earth and its bodies, a realm of inhuman matter whose motion was established before human will arrived on the scene.

Free will is an extraordinary thing. If it exists, it would be the only thing in the known universe that is autogenetic, that is not dependent on context or prior conditions. It would be a center of origin that--unlike anything else--has the power to extract itself from the contingent web of causality. Of most events or conditions we feel free to ask, What were the circumstances that made this condition possible? But our normal conception of consciousness, in order to retain autogenesis, must simply deny that the question can be asked of it.

We cannot interchange the term "consciousness" with "mind"--or with mind's

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[3] The expressions are generally identical in terms of the "work" they do as non-physical transcendent unities.

extension, the self--because unlike those terms consciousness alone is troubled by a lack of unity. It's generally conceived as a gateway between external phenomena and the detached mind. (It would be inappropriate to refer to it as a gatekeeper since that would introduce a second mind.) Consciousness, in this scenario, is really only a location, an empty space filled by the fleeting contents of consciousness. These contents--the world's phenomena--greet us capriciously, without motive or intent, and they do not pass through the gate in any orderly way. Consciousness cannot "make sense" of this endless chain of phenomena--it's too busy dealing with the next event. Because the chain is never at an end, consciousness cannot unify the contents that make it what it is--so we have to posit something "behind" consciousness, on the other side of the gate, where hopefully all this data can be accounted for as a meaningful totality.

Since all we are ever aware of is the unpredictable and unending contents of consciousness, we are never aware of anything outside these contents that could be said to embrace them into a unified and discrete whole. We do have fantasies about this unity, and we call this fantasized totality mind; but since we don't encounter such a thing in the empirical world, we have to say it lives in an invisible interior world.

Supported by a cursory sketch of a psychoanalytic conception of gender formation,[4] a discussion like this should provide a sufficient framework with which to meet Butler's close examination of identity via the subcategory of gender identity. Most psychoanalytic approaches, Butler observes, call into question the self (or the subject) as a coherent unity. Freud's psychic triad, for instance, reveals a subject split into at least three different

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[4] A brief paraphrase would do, for instance, of Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, trans. James Strachey (New York: HarperCollins). It will be important to emphasize the distinction made between sex and gender.

components. These separate entities are never re-united under a larger totality. Butler points out, however, that "although these theories tend to destabilize the subject as a construct of coherence, they nevertheless institute gender coherence through the stabilizing metanarrative of infantile development" (328-29). Although psychoanalysis posits a radical distinction between sex and gender, the developmental narrative keeps them in fixed relation to each other.

A criminally truncated version of the story might sound like this: In the beginning, the biological female is non-gendered. One day she sees her brother's or her father's penis, assumes hers was cut off and immediately desires a substitute in the form of either dad's penis or a baby of her own. Although she holds mom in contempt for not having a penis either, the subject personally identifies with her in the hopes that such an identity will allow her to get her own daddy figure and her own baby. Thus, a gendered female is born. This is just one simplified developmental model among many.

Butler calls attention to developmental stories as such. The process of gender formation is always told as a narrative; it has an initial setting, an origin of action (a beginning) and a consequence of action (closure). A narrative that acts as a description of not just one particular case but as a model for all cases can be described as a metanarrative. Just as a synchronic universal model is a metaphysic, a diachronic universal model is a metanarrative.

Even though such stories make it clear that the femininity of the female is the result of identification and not the necessary expression of her biology or anatomy, Butler points out that the inevitable unfolding of the developmental narrative does fix a link between sex and gender when it posits the awareness of the presence or absence of the penis as the initial cause of subsequent developmental events.

There are, however, Lacanian and French feminist versions of the gender-formation story that do not rely on the non-gendered subject's initial consciousness of sexual difference. In those stories, the imposition of sexual difference comes from without, usually in the form of a repressive paternal Law. "'In the beginning'," Butler explains, "is sexuality without power, then power arrives to create both culturally relevant sexual distinction (gender) and, along with that, gender hierarchy and dominance" (330). But since the imposition of the Law is seen as inevitable, and since it always positions its subjects in terms of sexual difference--what we are left with is a teleology that's as causally fixed as Freud's story. And even though most Lacanians and French feminists would be the first to insist, as Butler says, "that identity is always a tenuous and unstable affair, they nevertheless fix the terms of that instability with respect to a paternal law which is culturally invariant" (332). In the end, all psychoanalytic metanarratives "tell a story that constructs a discrete gender identity and discursive location which remains relatively fixed" (330).

Butler goes on to take a broader look at our normal conception of gender identity, and even at the concept of identity per se. We normally think of ourselves as having an interior and an exterior. We say that there's an interior realm where we think our unspoken thoughts, and an exterior realm which includes our bodies and everything else with physical extension. We also characterize this inner realm as the location of our "real" selves. Our outer appearance and behavior may change, but there exists in us a real essence that doesn't change. One's behavior as a gendered male or female, or as a homosexual or heterosexual, is the result of a pre-existing condition "in" one's psyche. What one is on the outside has its origin in what is on the inside. Butler calls this paradigm "an expressive model of gender whereby identity is first fixed internally and only subsequently manifest in some exterior way" (336).

Within the terms of psychoanalysis, one of the things said to inhabit this interior space is the "picture", so to speak, of the figure one identifies with. Part of the process of identifying with someone involves attempting to imitate them. In order to do that, one has to have a coherent conception of that person that one can evoke at any given time. Butler reminds us that "one identifies not with an empirical person but with a fantasy, the mother one wishes one had, the father one thought one had but didn't ... or with the posture of some imagined relation whom one also imagines to be the recipient of love" (334).

The term "interior space" that this discourse relies upon cannot possibly refer to an ontological reality--that is, to anything in the empirical world. But like the notion of mind, it does create a space where we can say our "true selves"--or, in this case, our "true genders" are housed. This interiority lets us talk about a hidden but fixed origin of our speech and behavior. So what is really going on when we talk about things like identification and internalization?

> It is not possible to attribute some kind of ontological meaning to the spatial internality of internalizations, for they are only fantasied as internal. ... [T]his very fantasy internal psychic space is essentially conditioned and mediated by a language that regularly figures interior psychic locations of various kinds. ... Fantasies themselves are often imagined as mental contents somehow projected onto an interior screen, a conception conditioned by a cinematic metaphorics of the psyche (333-34).

When a subject is attempting to "be a woman"--in other words, when she is attempting to identify with her notion of a woman, what she is appropriating and attempting to imitate is a constructed fantasy. This is the heart of Butler's "performance" theory of identity. When a young girl looks at the gestures and actions of a woman, she conceives of those gestures as an indication of an essential femininity within. Thus the girl learns to enact the gestures that

signify "woman". The woman herself learned to "perform" as a woman in the exact same way. "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express becomes a fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (336). The gestures, speech and behaviors that were once thought to be mere signifiers of a coherent gender identity within the subject are now understood to be the constituent elements of gender itself. Gender is gender performance. Butler points to the cultural practices of drag and cross-dressing as theatrical versions of an imitative process that we are enacting all the time. "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (338). What is being imitated is not a coherent disembodied identity that is never attained, but the various gestures that are said to indicate that fantasized identity. The gender parody of drag reveals that "the original identity after which gender fashions itself is itself an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect, that is, in its effect, postures as an imitation." Gender is produced as a material reality by gender performances.

A question likely to arise at this point: If gender is an appropriation of certain behaviors, who decided which behaviors would act as the proper signifiers of gender, and why? It's an important question, because these behaviors involve more than just minute gestures of fashion; they decide which social spaces a person may occupy and therefore the resources and powers she has at her disposal.

By subverting the idea that gender identity is the product of an inevitable structural law, or the expression of a natural essence, Butler's critique allows us to pay attention to what she calls the "disciplinary powers" that prescribe and regulate those behaviors. The traditional focus on gender formation as a matter of self-expression "precludes an analysis of

the political constitution of the gendered subject" (337). When it is acknowledged that "the gendered body ... has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality," it becomes clear that the discursive maintenance of a gendered interior "is a function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body" (336).

In addition to Butler's later Bodies that Matter, instructors may want to point their students to Michel Foucault for an analysis of the specific institutions and disciplinary powers that regulate the status, value and social significance of identity performances.

Ultimately, Butler's critique requires feminists to actively re-engage the phallocentric paradigms already in place; for although the work of theorists like Julia Kristeva play a crucial role in tracking the ways in which the female body is displaced and abjected, its promise that a hidden femininity can emerge from within a discursive environment on which it claims to be independent--like a weed pushing concrete aside--may disappoint us. Like a bookshelf, a course syllabus or literary canon, the discursive realm is a crowded and finite space. Just as we have to decide which books to take off the shelf in order to make space for alternative texts, we may have to displace normative gender performances with productions that, like drag, do not attempt to mask their theatricality.

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